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2022-06 -The Ismaili - A Misrepresented Shia Community (1159)

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THE ISMAILIS: A MISREPRESENTED SHIʿI MUSLIM COMMUNITY*

İsmaililer: Yanlış Tanıtılan Bir Şii Müslüman Topluluğu

Farhad DAFTARY**

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Abstract

The Ismailis represent the second largest Shiʿi Muslim community, after the Twelver or Ithnaʿashari Shiʿis. They have had an eventful and complex history dating back to the formative period of Islam. In the course of their long history, the Ismailis became subdivided into a number of major branches and minor groupings. However, since the end of the 5th/11th century, they have existed in terms of two main branches, the Nizaris and the Mustaʿli-Tayyibis, designated respectively as Khojas and Bohras in South Asia. Currently, the Ismailis are scattered as religious minorities in some thirty countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America. Numbering several millions, they also represent a diversity of ethnic groups, cultural and literary traditions, and speak a variety of languages. The Nizari Ismailis, who have had a continuous line of Imams or spiritual leaders, now acknowledge Prince Karim Aga Khan IV as their 49th Imam while the Imams of the Mustaʿli-Tayyibi Ismailis have remained in concealment since 524/1130, and in their absence lines of *daʿis* or representatives with supreme authority have led that community.

Keywords: Ismailis, Shiʿi Muslim Community, Nizari Ismailis, Mustaʿli-Tayyibis.

Öz

İsmaililer, On İki İmamcı veya İsnaaşeri Şiilerinden sonra ikinci en büyük Şii Müslüman topluluğu temsil eder. İslam'ın oluşum dönemine kadar uzanan olaylı ve karmaşık bir tarihleri vardır. Uzun tarihleri boyunca, İsmaililer bir dizi büyük kollara ve küçük gruplara ayrıldılar. Bununla birlikte, 5./11. yüzyılın sonundan beri, Güney Asya'da sırasıyla Hocalar ve Bohralar olarak adlandırılan Nizariler ve Musta'li-Tayyibiler olmak üzere iki ana kol olarak var olmuşlardır. Halihazırda İsmaililer, Asya, Orta Doğu, Afrika, Avrupa ve Kuzey Amerika'nın yaklaşık otuz ülkesine dini azınlıklar olarak dağılmış durumda. Sayıları birkaç milyon olan bu topluluklar aynı zamanda çeşitli etnik grupları, kültürel ve edebi gelenekleri temsil eder ve çeşitli dilleri konuşurlar. Sürekli bir İmamlar veya manevi liderler çizgisine sahip olan Nizari İsmaililer, şimdi Prens Kerim Ağa Han'ı 49. İmamları olarak kabul ederken, Musta'li-Tayyibi İsmaililerin İmamları 524/1130'dan beri gizli kalmış ve onların yokluğunda dailer veya en yüksek otoriteye sahip temsilciler bu topluluğa önderlik etmiştir.

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Ismaili historiography as well as perceptions of the Ismailis by outsiders in pre-modern times, in both Muslim and Christian milieus, have had their own fascinating trajectories. In medieval times, the Ismailis were persistently misrepresented by a variety of myths and legends circulating about their teachings and practices. This state of affairs resulted mainly from the fact that until the middle of the twentieth century the Ismailis were almost exclusively studied and evaluated on the basis of evidence collected, or often fabricated, by their detractors. The Ismailis posed serious challenges to the religio-political order established under the Abbasids, who led the Sunni Muslim majority. This explains why the Abbasids launched a prolonged literary campaign against the Ismailis, who were maliciously misrepresented in Sunni polemical writings as the arch-enemy of Islam. The Crusaders, who remained

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** Prof. Dr., The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, Co-Director and Head of the Department of Academic Research and Publications, fdaftary@iis.ac.uk, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2140-3963

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ignorant of the religious identity of the Ismailis, made their own contributions to the misrepresentations and the legends surrounding the Ismailis. The Crusaders and their European chroniclers fabricated and disseminated, in both the Latin Orient and Europe, a number of tales rooted in their 'imaginative ignorance' about the secret practices of the Nizari Ismailis, who were made famous in Europe as the Assassins.

The medieval misrepresentations of the Ismailis did not undergo significant revisions at the hands of the orientalists of the nineteenth century. The breakthrough in the study of the Ismailis had to await the recovery and study of a large number of genuine Ismaili texts in modern times, enabling new generations of scholars to embark on the gradual process of deconstructing and dispelling the medieval and orientalist myths about the Ismailis. As a result of modern progress in Ismaili studies, we have now acquired an accurate understanding of Ismaili history and thought and Ismaili contributions to Islamic thought and culture.

1. Medieval Muslim Perceptions

As the most revolutionary wing of Shiʿi Islam with a religio-political agenda that was aimed at uprooting the Abbasids and restoring the caliphate to a line of ʿAlid Imams recognised by them, the Ismailis from early on aroused the hostility of the Sunni establishment of the Muslim majority. The foundation of the Fatimid caliphate in North Africa in 297/909 marked the crowning success of the early Ismailis. The religio-political *daʿwa* of the Ismailis had finally led to the establishment of a state or *dawla* headed by the Ismaili Imam. The Ismaili Imam had always claimed to possess sole legitimate religious authority as the divinely appointed and infallible spiritual guide of all Muslims. By acquiring political power, and then transforming the Fatimid *dawla* into a vast and flourishing empire, the Ismaili challenge to the established order had become actualised. The Ismaili Imam now effectively presented his Shiʿi challenge to Abbasid hegemony and Sunni interpretations of Islam.

It was in the immediate aftermath of the foundation of the Fatimid caliphate that the Abbasid caliphs and the Sunni *ʿulama* launched what amounted to a widespread and official anti-Ismaili propaganda campaign. The overall aim of this systematic and prolonged campaign was to discredit and defame the entire Ismaili movement from its origins in the middle of the 2nd/8th century, so that the Ismailis could be readily classified and condemned as *malahida*, that is heretics or deviators from the true religious path. Muslim heresiographers, theologians, jurists and historians participated variously in this anti-Ismaili literary campaign. In particular, Sunni polemicists fabricated the necessary evidence that would lend support to the condemnation of the Ismailis on specific doctrinal grounds. They concocted detailed accounts of the alleged sinister objectives, immoral teachings and libertine practices of the Ismailis, while refuting the ʿAlid genealogy of the Ismaili Fatimid Imam-caliphs. A number of polemicists also fabricated travesties in which they attributed a variety of shocking doctrines and practices to the Ismailis. These forgeries circulated widely as genuine Ismaili treatises and were, in due course, used as authentic Ismaili source materials by numerous generations of Muslim authors writing about the Ismailis.

By spreading these defamations and forged accounts, the polemicists and other

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anti-Ismaili Muslim authors gradually created, in the course of the 4th/10th century coinciding with the first century of Fatimid rule, a 'black legend' (Ivanow, 1946). Accordingly, Ismailism was depicted as the arch-heresy of Islam, cleverly designed by a certain ʿAbd Allah b. Maymun al-Qaddah (Daftary, 2008, 167-169), or some other non-ʿAlid imposter, or possibly even a Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, aiming at destroying Islam from within. By the 5th/11th century, this anti-Ismaili fiction, with its elaborate details and stages of initiation culminating in atheism, had been accepted as an accurate and reliable description of Ismaili motives, beliefs and practices, leading to further anti-Ismaili polemics and heresiographical accusations as well as intensifying the animosity of other Muslim communities towards the Ismailis. The defamatory components of this anti-Ismaili 'black legend' continued to fire the imagination of countless generations of Sunni writers throughout medieval times.

Many of the essential elements of this 'black legend', relating especially to the origins and early history of Ismailism, may be traced to a certain Sunni polemicist and jurist called Abu ʿAbd Allah Muhammad b. ʿAli b. Rizam al-Kufi, better known as Ibn Rizam, who lived in Baghdad during the first half of the 4th/10th century. Around 340/951, Ibn Rizam wrote a major treatise in refutation of the Ismailis, also referred to as Batinis (Esotericists) by their detractors. Ibn Rizam's anti-Ismaili tract does not seem to have survived but it is quoted by Ibn al-Nadim in his famous catalogue of Arabic books, *al-Fihrist*, composed in 377/987 (Ibn al-Nadim, 1973). More importantly, Ibn Rizam's tract was used extensively a few decades later by another polemicist, Sharif Abu'l-Husayn Muhammad b. ʿAli, an ʿAlid from Damascus better known as Akhu Muhsin. This genealogist and polemicist wrote his own anti-Ismaili tract around 372/982. This work, too, has not survived, but long fragments from Akhu Muhsin's account have been preserved by later sources, notably the Egyptian historians al-Nuwayri (d. 733/1333), Ibn al-Dawadari (d. after 736/1335) and al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1442).[1]

The anti-Ismaili polemical writings provided a major source of information for Sunni heresiographers, who produced another important category of sources against the Ismailis. One of the most widely circulating of these heresiographical works was the one written in the 420s/1030s by al-Baghdadi (d. 429/1037). Al-Baghdadi, who had access to the anti-Ismaili writings of Ibn Rizam and Akhu Muhsin and like them refuted the ʿAlid descent of the Fatimids, devoted a long chapter in his heresiography to the refutation of the Ismailis (Batinis) (al-Baghdadi, 1328). He opens the chapter by stating that the damage caused by the Batiniyya to Muslims is greater than those caused by the Jews, Christians and Magians (Majus); he then quotes long fragments from a certain *Kitab al-Siyasa* (Book of Methodology), describing the seven stages of initiation into Ismailism, leading finally to the state of unbelief (*al-khalʿ wa'l-salkh*).[2] One of the most popular early travesties attributed to the Ismailis themselves, the *Kitab al-Siyasa* was, in fact, mentioned for the first time in Akhu Muhsin's polemical

1. Shihab al-Din Ahmad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhab al-Nuwayri, *Nihayat al-arab fi funun al-adab*, vol. 25, ed. M. J. ʿA. al-Hini (Cairo, 1984), pp. 187-317; Abu Bakr ʿAbd Allah b. al-Dawadari, *Kanz al-durar*, vol. 6, ed. S. al-Munajjid (Cairo, 1961), pp. 6-21, 44-156; Taqi al-Din Ahmad b. ʿAli al-Maqrizi, *Ittiʿaz al-hunafa bi-akhbar al-aʾimma al-Fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, vol. 1, ed. J. al-Shayyal (Cairo, 1967), pp. 22-29, 151-207; ed. Ayman F. Sayyid (Damascus, 2010), vol. 1, pp. 20-27, 173-237.
2. al-Baghdadi., pp. 278 ff.

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treatise.[3] Used by several generations of polemicists and heresiographers, the anonymous *Kitab al-Siyasa* evidently contained all the ideas needed to condemn the Ismailis as 'heretics' on account of their alleged libertinism (*ibaha*) and atheism. Needless to add that the Ismaili tradition knows this work, and other fictitious accounts, only through the polemics of its adversaries. Be that as it may, the polemical and heresiographical traditions, in turn, influenced Muslim historians, theologians, and jurists who wrote on the Ismailis, while systematically turning other Muslims against the Ismailis, now the 'heretics' *par excellence.*

The revolt of the Persian Ismailis led by Hasan-i Sabbah (d. 518/1124) against the Sunni Saljuq Turks, the new overlords of the Abbasids, called forth another prolonged and vigorous Sunni reaction against the Ismailis in general and the Persian Nizari Ismailis in particular. The new literary campaign, accompanied by incessant military expeditions against Alamut and other Nizari Ismaili strongholds in Persia, was initiated by Nizam al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), the Saljuq vizier and virtual master of Saljuq dominions for more than two decades, with full support of the Abbasid caliph and the Saljuq sultan. An outspoken enemy of the Ismailis, Nizam al-Mulk devoted a long chapter in his *Siyasat-nama* (The Book of Government) to the condemnation of the Ismailis who, according to him, aimed 'to abolish Islam, to mislead mankind and cast them into perdition' (Nizam al-Mulk, 1978). This work, completed shortly before Nizam al-Mulk was assassinated in 485/1092, gave counsel to the Saljuq sultan Malik Shah (r. 465-485/1073-1092), also warning the sultan of dangers threatening his realm, notably those posed by certain Iranian movements as well as the Ismailis. The hostility towards the Ismailis was a response to their rapidly growing influence in Persia. We may recall that in just two years after establishing himself in the mountain fortress of Alamut in 483/1090, Hasan-i Sabbah had successfully carved out a territorial state for the Persian Ismailis in the midst of the Saljuq sultanate. He also received much popular support from Persians of different social classes who were dissatisfied with the alien rule of the Saljuq Turks.

The earliest polemical treatise against the Persian Ismailis of the Alamut period was, however, written by no less a figure than al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), the most eminent contemporary Sunni theologian and jurist. He was, in fact, commissioned by the Abbasid caliph al-Mustazhir (r. 487-512/1094-1118) to write a major treatise in refutation of the Batinis. This was another designation coined for the Ismailis by their adversaries who accused them of dispensing with the *zahir*, or the commandments and prohibitions of the *shariʿa*, because they claimed to have found access to the *batin*, or the inner meaning of the Islamic message as interpreted by the Ismaili Imam. In this widely circulated book, commonly known as *al-Mustazhiri*, al-Ghazali fabricated his own version of the Ismaili system of graded initiation leading to the ultimate stage of atheism (al-Ghazali, 1964 ; Mitha, 2001). Al-Ghazali completed this work shortly before leaving his teaching post at the Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad in 488/1095. He aimed his anti-Ismaili polemics particularly against the Ismaili doctrine of *taʿlim*,

3. The Arabic text of this forged treatise, together with its English translation, was partially reconstructed by S. M. Stern on the basis of fragments preserved by al-Nuwayri, al-Baghdadi and others; see S. M. Stern, 'The Book of the Highest Initiation and other Anti-Ismaʿili Travesties', in his *Studies in Early Ismaʿilism* (Jerusalem and Leiden, 1983), pp. 56-83.

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or authoritative teaching by the Ismaili Imam, as articulated in a vigorous form by Hasan-i Sabbah. The doctrine of *taʿlim* posed a serious intellectual challenge to the Sunni establishment as it also refuted the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliph's authority as the spiritual spokesman of the Muslims. The doctrine of *taʿlim*, which was essentially a reformulation of the old Shiʿi doctrine of the imamate, served as the basis of all subsequent doctrinal positions of the early Nizari Ismailis. Al-Ghazali's anti-Ismaili defamations were adopted by other Sunni writers who, like him and Nizam al-Mulk, were also familiar with the earlier 'black legend'. At any rate, a variety of Sunni authors, including Saljuq chroniclers, actively participated in the renewed propaganda against the Nizari Ismailis, while Saljuq armies persistently failed to dislodge the Nizari Ismailis from their mountain fortresses, despite their much superior military power. In fact, by the final years of Hasan-i Sabbah's life, Nizari-Saljuq relations had entered a state of 'stalemate'.[4] Indeed, the Ismailis continued to be misrepresented among other Muslim communities throughout the centuries until the advent of modern progress in Ismaili studies.

2. Medieval European Perceptions

In the meantime, the Ismailis had found a new enemy in the Christian Crusaders, who had arrived in the Holy Land to supposedly liberate their own co-religionists. The Crusaders seized Jerusalem, their primary target, in 492/1099 and subsequently engaged in extensive military and diplomatic encounters with the Fatimids in Egypt and the Nizari Ismailis in Syria, with lasting consequences in terms of contributing to the distorted image of the Nizaris in Europe. The Syrian Nizari Ismailis attained the peak of their power and fame under the leadership of Rashid al-Din Sinan, their chief *daʿi* for some three decades until his death in 589/1193 (Daftary, 2008). It was in the time of Sinan, the original 'Old Man of the Mountain' of the Crusader sources, that occidental chroniclers of the Crusades and a number of European travellers and diplomatic emissaries began to write about the Nizari Ismailis, designated by them as the 'Assassins'. The very term Assassin, based on the variants of the Arabic word *hashishi* (plural, *hashishiyya*), that was applied to the Nizari Ismailis in the derogatory sense of 'irreligious social outcasts' by other Muslims, was picked up locally in the Levant by the Crusaders and other European observers. At the same time, the Frankish circles and their occidental chroniclers, who were not interested in collecting accurate information about Islam as a religion and its internal divisions, despite their proximity to Muslims, remained completely ignorant of Muslims in general and the Ismailis in particular. In fact, the Syrian Nizaris were the first Shiʿi Muslim community with whom the Crusaders had come into contact. However, the Crusader circles remained unaware of the religious identity of the Ismailis and had only vague and erroneous ideas regarding the Sunni- Shiʿi division in Islam.

It was under such circumstances that the Frankish circles themselves began to fabricate and put into circulation, both in the Latin Orient and in Europe, a number

4. See Carole Hillenbrand, 'The Power Struggle between the Saljuqs and the Ismaʿilis of Alamut, 487-518/1094-1124: The Saljuq Perspective', in F. Daftary, ed., *Mediaeval Ismaʿili History and Thought* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 205-220; F. Daftary, 'Ismaili-Seljuq Relations: Conflict and Stalemate', in E. Herzig and S. Stewart, ed., *The Age of the Seljuqs: The Idea of Iran*, VI (London, 2015), pp. 41-57; reprinted in F. Daftary, *Ismaili History and Intellectual Traditions* (London, 2018), pp. 223-237.

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of sensational tales about the secret practices of the Nizari Ismailis. It is significant to note that none of the variants of these tales are to be found in contemporary Muslim sources, including the most hostile ones written during the 6th-7th/12th-13th centuries.

The Crusaders were particularly impressed by the highly exaggerated reports and rumours of the assassinations attributed to the Nizari Ismailis, and the daring behaviour of their *fidaʾi*s, self-sacrificing devotees who carried out such missions in public places and normally lost their own lives in the process. It may be noted that in the 6th/12th century, almost any assassination of any significance committed in the central Islamic lands was readily attributed to the daggers of the Nizari *fidaʾi*s. This explains why these imaginative tales came to revolve around the recruitment, indoctrination and training of the would-be *fidaʾi*s – because they were meant to provide satisfactory explanations for behaviour that would otherwise seem irrational or puzzling to the medieval European mind. These so-called Assassin legends consisted of a number of separate but interconnected tales, including the '*hashish* legend', the 'paradise legend', and the 'death-leap legend'. The tales developed in stages, receiving new embellishments at successive stages, and finally culminated in a synthesis popularised by Marco Polo (d. 1324).[5] The Venetian traveller added his own original contribution to these legends in the form of a 'secret garden of paradise', where bodily pleasures were supposedly procured for the *fidaʾi*s with the aid of *hashish* by their mischievous leader, the Old Man, as part of their indoctrination and training (Polo, 1929).

Marco Polo's version of the Assassin legends, offered as a report obtained from reliable contemporary sources in Persia, was reiterated to various degrees by subsequent European writers, such as Odoric of Pordenone (d. 1331), as the standard description of the 'Old Man of the Mountain and his Asssassins'. However, it did not occur to any European that Marco Polo may have actually heard the tales in Italy after returning to Venice in 1295 from his journeys to the East—tales that were by then quite widespread in Europe and could be traced to European antecedents on the subject. We must also consider the possibility that the Assassin legends contained in Marco Polo's travelogue may have been entirely inserted, as a digressionary note, by Rustichello of Pisa, the Italian romance writer who was responsible for committing the account of Marco Polo's travels to writing. Be that as it may, the contemporary Persian historian ʿAta-Malik Juwayni (d. 681/1283), an avowed enemy of the Nizaris who accompanied the Mongol conqueror Hulagu to Alamut in 654/1256 and personally inspected that fortress and its famous library before their destruction by the Mongols, does not report discovering any 'secret garden of paradise' there, as claimed in Marco Polo's popular account. In this context, it should also be added that it was Marco Polo himself who transferred the scene of the legends from Syria to Persia.

From around 570/1175, European travellers, chroniclers and envoys to the Latin Orient who had something to say about the 'Assassins' participated in the process of

5. For a survey of these tales, see F. Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismaʿilis* (London, 1994), especially pp. 88-127; Turkish trans., *Alamut Efsanelerie*, tr. Özgür Çelebi (Ankara, 2008), pp. 143-201. See also F. Daftary, 'The Ismaʿilis and the Crusaders: History and Myth', in Z. Hunyadi and J. Laszlovszky, ed., *The Crusades and the Military Orders* (Budapest, 2001), pp. 21-41.

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fabricating, transmitting and legitimising the legends. Different Assassin legends, or components of particular tales, were 'imagined' independently and at times concurrently by different European authors, such as Arnold of Lübeck (d. 1212), the German abbot and historian, and James of Vitry (d. 1240), the French bishop of Acre and a Crusader historian. The legends were, thus, embellished over time tending towards more elaborate versions, and they culminated in Marco Polo's version. By the 8th/14th century, the Assassin legends had acquired wide currency and were generally accepted as reliable and accurate descriptions of secret Nizari Ismaili practices, in much the same way as the earlier anti-Ismaili 'black legend' of the Sunni polemicists had been accepted as accurate explanation of Ismaili motives, teachings and practices. Henceforth, the Nizari Ismailis were depicted in medieval European sources as a sinister order of drugged 'assassins' bent on indiscriminate murder and mayhem.

Meanwhile, the word 'assassin', instead of signifying the name of a mysterious community in Syria, had acquired a new meaning in French, Italian and other European languages. It had become a common noun designating a professional murderer. And with the advent of this new usage, the origin of the term was soon forgotten in Europe. However, the 'oriental sect' designated earlier by that name in the Crusader sources continued to arouse interest among Europeans, mainly because of the enduring popularity of the Assassin legends, which had acquired an independent life of their own. By the 12th/18th century, a multitude of etymologies of this term had been proposed by various European philologists and lexicographers. In sum, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans still perceived the Ismailis in utterly confused and fanciful manners, without even having become aware of the Shiʿi Muslim identity of the people in question.

3. Orientalist Perspectives

A new phase in the study of Islam, and to some extent the Ismailis, was initiated in the nineteenth century with the increasing access of the orientalists to the textual sources of the Muslims, Arabic and Persian manuscripts that were acquired by major European libraries. The orientalists, led by Baron Antoine I. Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), now began their more scholarly study of Islam on the basis of works written mainly in Arabic and by Sunni Muslim authors. Consequently, they studied Islam according to Sunni perspectives and, borrowing classifications from their Christian contexts, treated Shiʿism as the 'heterodox' interpretation of Islam, or even as a 'heresy', in contrast to Sunnism which was taken to represent Islamic 'orthodoxy'. Indeed, Western scholarship on Islam has continued variously to be framed by its Arabo-Sunni perspectives. It was mainly on this basis, as well as the continued attraction of the seminal Assassin legends, that the orientalists launched their own study of the Ismailis.

It was de Sacy who finally also resolved the mystery of the name 'Assassin' in his famous *Memoir*.[6] He showed that the word Assassin was connected to the Arabic

6. Silvestre de Sacy, 'Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins, et sur l'étymologie de leur nom', in *Mémoires de l'Institut Royal de France*, 4 (1818), pp. 1–84; reproduced in Bryan S. Turner, ed., *Orientalism: Early Sources*, vol. I: *Readings in Orientalism* (London, 2000), pp. 118–169; English trans., 'Memoir on the Dynasty of the Assassins, and on the Etymology of their Name', in Daftary, *Assassin Legends*, pp. 129–188; Turkish trans., 'Haşaşiler Hanedanliği ve İsimlerinin Kökeni Üzerine Bir Deneme', in Daftary, *Alamut Efsaneleri*, pp. 209–283.

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hashish, referring to Indian hemp. More specifically, he argued that the main variant forms of this term, such as *Assassini* and *Assissini*, occurring in Latin documents of the Crusades and in different European languages, were derived from the Arabic word *hashishi* (plural, *hashishiyya*). He was able to cite Arabic texts, such as the history of the contemporary Syrian chronicler Abu Shama (d. 665/1267), in which the Nizari Ismailis were called *hashishi* (*hashishiyya*). Silvestre de Sacy also produced important studies on early Ismailis in connection with his lifelong interest in the Druze religion (Silvestre de Sacy, 1838). Although de Sacy and other orientalists correctly identified the Ismailis as a Shiʿi Muslim community, they were still obliged to study them on the basis of the hostile Sunni sources and the fictitious occidental accounts of the Crusader circles. As a result, the orientalists, too, endorsed to various degrees, the anti-Ismaili 'black legend' of the medieval Sunni polemicists and the Assassin legends of the Crusaders.

De Sacy's distorted evaluation of the Ismailis, although unintentional, set the frame within which other orientalists of the nineteenth century studied the medieval history of the Ismailis. The orientalists' interest in the Ismailis had now been rekindled by the anti-Ismaili accounts of the newly-discovered Sunni chronicles which seemed to confirm and complement the Assassin legends found in the occidental sources familiar to them. It was under such circumstances that misrepresentation and plain fiction came to permeate the first European book devoted exclusively to the history of the Persian Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut period. The author of this book was Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856), an Austrian diplomat-orientalist, who endorsed Marco Polo's narrative in its entirety as well as all the medieval defamations levelled against the Ismailis by their Sunni detractors.

Originally published in German in 1818, von Hammer's book achieved great success in Europe; it was translated into French and English and continued to be treated as the standard history of the Nizari Ismailis until at least the 1930s.[7] With a few exceptions, European scholarship made little further progress in the study of the Ismailis during the second half of the nineteenth century, while Ismaili sources still remained generally inaccessible to orientalists. Indeed, the Ismailis continued to be misrepresented to various degrees by orientalists such as de Goeje (1836–1909), who made valuable contributions to the study of the Qarmatis of Bahrayn but whose incorrect interpretation of Fatimid-Qarmati relations was generally adopted by other orientalists (de Goeje, 1886). There was a lack of significant progress in the study of the Fatimids as well; and this is clearly revealed in the fact that the first monograph on the Fatimids written in the 1920s still did not contain any references to Ismaili sources (O'Leary, 1923). Orientalism, thus, gave a new lease of life to the myths surrounding the Ismailis, a deplorable state of affairs that remained essentially unchanged until the 1930s. This should not actually be surprising, however, as very few Ismaili sources had been available to the orientalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

7. J. von Hammer-Purgstall, *Die Geschichte der Assassinen aus Morgenländischen Quellen* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1818); English trans., *The History of the Assassins, derived from Oriental Sources*, tr. O. C. Wood (London, 1835, reprinted, New York, 1968); French trans., *Histoire de l'ordre des Assassins*, tr. J. J. Hellert and P. A. de la Nourais (Paris, 1833; reprinted, Paris, 1961). On this book and its author, see F. Daftary, 'The "Order of the Assassins": J. von Hammer and the Orientalist Misrepresentations of the Nizari Ismailis', *Iranian Studies*, 39 (2006), pp. 71–81, reprinted in Daftary, *Ismaili History and Intellectual Traditions*, pp. 212–222.

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Meanwhile, Westerners continued to refer to the Nizari Ismailis as the Asssassins, a misnomer rooted in a medieval pejorative neologism, even though the name was now serving as a common noun in European languages in reference to a murderer.

The breakthrough in modern scholarship on the Ismailis had to await the discovery of genuine Ismaili texts on a large scale, manuscript sources which had been preserved in numerous collections by the Ismailis themselves in Yemen, Syria, Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia and India. A few Ismaili manuscripts of Syrian provenance had already appeared in Paris during the nineteenth century, and some fragments of these texts were studied and published by Stanislas Guyard (1846–1884) and other orientalists (Guyard, 1874). At the same time, the German orientalist Friedrich Dieterici (1821–1903) published many portions of the famous encyclopaedic corpus known as the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa* (The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity), with a German translation, without recognising their Ismaili connection.

Meanwhile, other types of information on the Ismailis had started to appear. While travelling in Syria in 1895, the Swiss orientalist Max van Berchem (1863–1921) read almost all of the epigraphic evidence of the Ismaili fortresses in Syria (van Berchem, 1897); and the French orientalist Paul Casanova (1861–1921), who later produced important studies on the Fatimids, became the first orientalist to produce a study on the Nizari Ismaili coins minted during the Alamut period (Casanova, 1893). Much information on the Nizari Ismaili Khojas of South Asia and the 46th Ismaili Imam, Hasan ʿAli Shah Aga Khan I (1817–1881), also became available in the course of a complicated legal case investigated by the High Court of Bombay, known as the Aga Khan Case, which culminated in the famous judgement of 1866 (Fyzee, 1965 ; Purohit, 2012).

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, more Ismaili manuscripts preserved in Yemen and Central Asia began to be recovered, though still on a limited basis. In 1903, Giuseppe Caprotti (1869–1919), an Italian merchant who had spent some three decades in Yemen, brought a collection of Arabic manuscripts to Italy and sold it to the Ambrosiana Library in Milan. This collection contained several Arabic Ismaili manuscripts. Meanwhile, a number of Russian scholars and officials had become aware of the existence of Ismaili communities within the Central Asian regions of the Russian empire, and they now made attempts to establish contacts with them and study their rituals and literary heritage. These Central Asian Ismailis, who lived mainly in the mountainous region of Badakhshan, belonged exclusively to the Nizari branch of Ismailism.

The Ismailis of Badakhshan, now divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, have preserved the literary heritage of the Nizaris, written entirely in the Persian language, produced during the Alamut period and subsequent centuries. Count Aleksey A. Bobrinskiy (1861–1938), a Russian scholar who studied the inhabitants of Badakhshan in 1898, published the first account of the Nizari Ismailis of those regions (Bobrinskiy, 1902). Subsequently, in 1914, Ivan I. Zarubin (1887–1964), the eminent Russian ethnologist and specialist in Tajik dialects, acquired a small collection of Persian Ismaili manuscripts from the western Pamir districts of Shughnan and Rushan, in Badakhshan, and presented this collection to the Asiatic Museum of the Imperial Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. The Zarubin Collection was later cat-

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alogued by Wladimir Ivanow (1886–1970), the foremost pioneer of modern Ismaili studies who was then assistant keeper of oriental manuscripts at the Asiatic Museum.[8] In 1918, the Asiatic Museum acquired a second collection of Persian Ismaili manuscripts. These texts had been obtained a few years earlier from Central Asia by Aleksandr A. Semenov (1873–1958), a Russian pioneer in Ismaili studies from Tashkent. [9] These Ismaili manuscripts of Central Asian provenance are currently housed at the Russian Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St Petersburg. However, these efforts were few and far between.

By the 1920s, the knowledge of orientalists on Ismaili works was still very limited, as reflected in the first Western bibliography of Ismaili literature compiled by Louis Massignon (1883–1962), the leading French pioneer in Shiʿi studies. [10] Little further progress was made in the study of the Ismailis during the 1920s, aside from the publication of some of the works of the Persian Ismaili *daʿi*, poet and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 462/1070). Indeed, by 1927 when the article 'Ismaʿiliya' by Clément Huart (1854–1926) appeared in the second volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, European orientalist studies on the Ismailis still essentially displayed the misrepresentations of the Crusaders and the defamations of the medieval Sunni polemicists. However, the ground had been broadly prepared for the initiation of an entirely new phase in the study of the Ismailis – the modern phase based increasingly on access to Ismaili textual materials.

4. Modern Progress in Ismaili Studies

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies, founded on the recovery and study of numerous genuine Ismaili works, was initiated in the 1930s in Bombay, where significant collections of Ismaili manuscripts have been preserved. This breakthrough resulted mainly from the efforts of Wladmir Ivanow (1886–1970),[11] and a few Ismaili Bohra scholars, notably Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899–1981), Husayn F. al-Hamdani (1901–1962) and Zahid ʿAli (1888–1958), who produced their own studies using their personal collections of Ismaili manuscripts. Subsequently, most of these collections were donated to various academic institutions, including especially The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London (de Blois, 2011 ; Cortese, 2003), and thus were made available to scholars worldwide.

After the revolution of 1917 in his native Russia, Ivanow eventually settled in Bombay, where he had established relations with some Ismaili Khojas who introduced

8. V. A. Ivanov, 'Ismailitskie rukopisi Aziatskago Muzeya. Sobranie I. Zarubina, 1916 g.' [Ismaili Manuscripts of the Asiatic Museum. I. Zarubin's Collection, 1916], *Bulletin de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de Russie*, 6 series, 11 (1917), pp. 359–386; see also W. Ivanow, *Fifty Years in the East: The Memoirs of Wladimir Ivanow*, ed. F. Daftary (London, 2015), pp. 47–54.

9. A. A. Semenov, 'Opisanie ismailitskikh rukopisey, sobrannïkh A.A. Semyonovïm' [Description of Ismaili Manuscripts, A. A. Semenov's Collection], *Bulletin de l'Académie des Sciences de Russie*, 6 series, 12 (1918), pp. 2171–2202.

10. L. Massignon, 'Esquisse d'une bibliographie Qarmate', in R. A. Nicholson and T. W. Arnold, ed., *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne on his 60th Birthday* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 329–338; reprinted in L. Massignon, *Opera Minora*, ed. Y. Moubarac (Paris, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 627–639.

11. See F. Daftary, 'Modern Ismaili Studies and W. Ivanow's Contributions', in Ivanow, *Fifty Years*, pp. 9–36; see also F. Daftary, 'Ivanow, Vladimir', in E. Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (New York, 2008), vol. 14, pp. 298–300. See also Mustafa Öz, 'Ivanow, Wladimir', in *Türkiye Dianet Vakfi İslâm Ansiklopedesi* (Istanbul, 2001), vol. 23, pp. 487–488.

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him to Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (1877–1957), the 48th Imam of the Nizari Ismailis. In 1931, the Ismaili Imam formally commissioned Ivanow to conduct research into the literature, history and teachings of the Ismailis. Henceforth, Ivanow also found ready access to the private collections of Persian Ismaili manuscripts held by the Nizari Ismailis of India, Afghanistan, Persia and Central Asia. It was, indeed, in Bombay of the early 1930s that Ivanow and his small group of Bohra colleagues brought about the breakthrough in modern Ismaili studies. In 1933, Ivanow produced the first detailed catalogue of Ismaili works (Ivanow, 1933), citing some 700 titles written by a multitude of Ismaili authors, such as Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 322/934), Jaʿfar b. Mansur al-Yaman (d. ca. 346/957), al-Qadi al-Nuʿman (d. 363/974), Abu Yaʿqub al-Sijistani (d. after 361/971), Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. after 411/1020), al-Muʾayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (d. 470/1078), Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 462/1070), and many later *daʿi*-authors who lived in Yemen, Syria, Persia and other regions. This catalogue pointed to the hitherto unknown richness and diversity of Ismaili literary and intellectual traditions. The initiation of modern scholarship in Ismaili studies may, in fact, be traced to this very publication, which provided for the first time a scientific framework for research in this new branch of Islamic studies. By the time Ivanow's article 'Ismaʿiliya' was published in 1938 in the supplementary volume to the first edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the Ismailis were already treated with much greater accuracy by contemporary scholars—the modern scholarship in Ismaili studies had now clearly commenced.

Ismaili scholarship received a major boost through the establishment in 1946 of the Ismaili Society in Bombay under the patronage of Aga Khan III, providing the much-needed institutional impetus to this field. Ivanow played a key role also in the foundation of the Ismaili Society with its library of manuscripts and various series of publications, which were devoted mainly to Ivanow's own monographs as well as editions and translations of mostly Persian Nizari Ismaili texts. In addition to publishing the Ismaili works of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 672/1274), dating to the late Alamut period, Ivanow recovered and published several significant texts of the so-called Anjudan period in later Nizari Ismaili history. It was also Ivanow who, for the first time, classified Ismaili history in terms of several main phases in a brief historical survey, representing the first scholarly work of its kind (Ivanow, 1952). Meanwhile, Ivanow acquired a large number of Arabic and Persian Ismaili manuscripts for the Ismaili Society's library. Subsequently, these manuscript resources were transferred to The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. At the same time, numerous Ismaili texts had begun to be critically edited and studied, preparing the ground for further progress in the field. Ivanow readily shared his knowledge as well as the manuscripts of the Ismaili Society with other scholars, including especially Henry Corbin (1903–1978), the French Islamicist who launched his own 'Bibliothèque Iranienne' series of publications in which several Arabic and Persian Ismaili works appeared (de Smet, 2005). Corbin represented a new generation of scholars interested in Ismaili studies. It was due to Ivanow's foundational work on the Nizari Ismailis that the renowned American scholar Marshall Hodgson (1922–1968) was enabled to write the first scholarly history of the Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut period (Hodgson, 1955), a work that finally replaced von Hammer's legendary account published in 1818.

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Meanwhile, Ivanow indefatigably recovered and published a good portion of the extant Persian literature of the Nizari Ismailis. By 1963, when he published an expanded edition of his Ismaili catalogue, Ivanow had identified a few hundred more Ismaili titles, (Ivanow, 1963) while the field of Ismaili studies had experienced immense progress. Meanwhile, other scholars, representing yet another generation, such as Bernard Lewis (1916–2018), Samuel M. Stern (1920–1969), Abbas Hamdani (1926–2019) and Wilferd Madelung, were entering the field with their own contributions, especially on the early Ismailis and their relations with the dissident Qarmatis. At the same time, a number of Russian scholars, such as Lyudmila V. Stroeva (1910–1993) and Andrey E. Bertel's (1926–1995), had maintained the earlier interests of their compatriots in Ismaili studies, though often intellectually restricted by their Marxist class-struggle framework. Stroeva produced what remains the only modern Russian account of the history of the Nizari Ismaili state in Persia (Stroeva, 1978). Some of these Russian scholars were also involved in acquiring large collections of Persian manuscripts from the Badakhshan region of Central Asia. [12]

In Syria, two scholars, namely ʿArif Tamir (1921–1998) and Mustafa Ghalib (1923–1981), belonging to different Nizari Ismaili branches, now made Ismaili texts of Syrian provenance available, albeit in defective editions. Also, several Egyptian scholars with interests in the medieval history of their country, notably Hasan Ibrahim Hasan (1892–1968), Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal (1911–1967), Muhammad J. Surur (1911–1992), ʿAbd al-Munʿim Majid (1920–1999), and Ayman F. Sayyid made contributions to Fatimid studies, complementing Ismaili studies in general. Another Egyptian scholar, Muhammad Kamil Husayn (1901–1961), published several Fatimid Ismaili texts in his 'Silsilat makhtutat al-Fatimiyyin' series in Cairo. The state of our newly emerging knowledge on Ismaili history and thought was summed up by W. Madelung in his seminal article 'Ismaʿiliyya', published in 1973 in the new (second) edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. The progress in the recovery of Ismaili texts during 1933–1977, which had made possible the astonishing breakthrough in Ismaili studies, is well documented in Professor Ismail K. Poonawala's monumental catalogue, which identifies more than 1300 titles written by some 200 authors (Poonawala, 1977).

Progress in Ismaili studies has proceeded at an unprecedented pace during the last four decades, as more Ismaili sources are recovered from Central Asia and other regions, and many of these texts are systematically edited and studied by a growing number of established scholars, such as W. Madelung, I. K. Poonawala, Heinz Halm, Paul E. Walker, Carmela Baffioni and Daniel de Smet, as well as newcomers to the field. It was in this context that, drawing on the cumulative results of modern Ismaili studies, the present writer was able to produce the first comprehensive history of the Ismailis, covering all branches of the community and all regions where the Ismailis live.[13] Subsequently, this author also produced a shorter version of this survey.[14]

12. See, for instance, A. E. Bertel's and M. Bakoev, *Alphabetic Catalogue of Manuscripts found by 1959-1963 Expedition in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region*, ed. B. G. Gafurov and A. M. Mirzoev (Moscow, 1967).
13. F. Daftary, *The Ismaʿilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990, 2nd ed. Cambridge, 2007). For the Turkish translations of this book's first and second editions see, respectively, *Muhalif İslamin 1400 yili: İsmaililer Tarih ve Kuram*, tr. E. Özkaya (Ankara, 2001); *İsmaililer: Tarih ve Öğretileri*, tr. E. Toprak (Ankara, 2005); *İsmaililer: Tarihleri ve Öğretileri*, tr. A. Fethi (2nd ed., Istanbul, 2014)
14. F. Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis* (Edinburgh, 1998). This book has been translated into Arabic,

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A key role in modern Ismaili scholarship is currently played by The Institute of Ismaili Studies, founded in 1977 in London by the present Ismaili Imam, H. H. Prince Karim Aga Khan IV (Walker, 2002). This academic institution also holds more than 3000 Ismaili manuscripts in Arabic, Persian and a variety of Indic languages, representing the largest collection of its kind, at least in the West. The Institute makes these and other primary resources readily available to scholars worldwide. The Institute is, indeed, now serving as the main point of reference for Ismaili scholarship, while also making its contributions through various programmes of research and publications. Amongst these, special mention should be made of the 'Ismaili Texts and Translations Series', in which critical editions of Arabic and Persian Ismaili texts are published together with English translations and contextualising introductions. Numerous scholars participate in the Institute's programmes, as well as in a special series devoted to a complete critical edition and annotated English translation of the *Rasaʾil Ikhwan al-Safa* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity), launched in 2008. As is well known, the date of composition and authorship of this encyclopaedic work is still debated by scholars. Professor Carmela Baffioni, who has been very erudite in her work on the *Rasaʾil*, is a key member of the Institute's team of scholars currently engaged in this project. Among the various regional Ismaili traditions that have received scholarly attention in recent decades, particular mention must be made of the Satpanth tradition of the Ismaili Khojas of South Asian origin, as reflected in their devotional literature known as *ginan*s. In this area, Professors Azim Nanji and Ali Asani have made significant contributions.

Conclusion

In sum, the progress in modern Ismaili studies has, indeed, amounted to nothing less than a revolution in this field. Many Ismaili texts have now been recovered and published in critical editions, while an increasing number of secondary studies on various aspects of Ismaili history and thought have been produced by more than three successive generations of scholars, as documented in this author's bibliography (Daftary, 2004). With these developments, based on the increasing accessibility of Ismaili textual materials to a growing number of scholars, the sustained scholarly study of the Ismailis, which by the closing decades of the twentieth century had already greatly deconstructed the seminal anti-Ismaili tales of medieval times, promises to dissipate the remaining misrepresentations of the Ismailis rooted in either the 'hostility' or the 'imaginative ignorance' of earlier generations.

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Persian, Urdu, Gujarati, Chinese, Tajik and numerous European languages.

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